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WATER POLLUTION:

Spills of mine tailings more frequent and expensive -- report

Manuel Quiñones, E&E reporter

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Mine waste spills have become more common and costly despite improved mineral extraction technology, a nonprofit mining watchdog says.

The report released recently by Earthworks maintains that technology improvements are spurring rather than reducing the number and magnitude of spills at tailings dams.

"The Mining Metric creating this exponentially increasing consequence in the event of a tailings dam failure, is driven by continuously lower grades in identified resources and continuously falling real prices of most metals," the paper says.

"The costs to excavate more material for a ton of end product at a lower price has been made possible through technology improvements in milling and concentration processes, bulk mining and economies of scale."

Earthworks' report is aimed at heightening scrutiny of tailings impoundments.

Last year, more than 20 million cubic meters of mine waste spilled from Imperial Metals Corp.'s Mount Polley copper, gold and silver mine in British Columbia.

"More mining waste disasters like Mount Polley are inevitable," said David Chambers, a report co-author and director of the Montana-based Center for Science in Public Participation. "If mining practices continue as usual, we are going to see more severe spills, more frequently, that will cost the public hundreds of millions to billions of dollars to clean up."

The report says fewer tailings spills in recent decades may lead people to believe modern mining practices are making a difference. But the paper also points to a trend of more serious and very serious failures since 1960.

Almost half of all serious tailings dam failures that have happened between 1940 and 2010 occurred after 1990, the paper says. More than a dozen spills, it says, were large enough to cause significant environmental problems or loss of life.

"Our research shows that most catastrophic failures of tailings dams are the result of poorly informed, consciously made business and management decisions by miners who then refuse to accept the public loss and consequence of those decisions," co-author Lindsay Newland Bowker said.

An independent report of the Mount Polley spill blamed design problems and called for more scrutiny of tailings dumps. It says business as usual could lead to more spills ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 6).

Mining Association of Canada CEO Pierre Gratton said companies were already looking into their tailings impoundments. And he said changes may be in order according to the report's recommendations.

"The tailings dam failure at the Mount Polley mine was an unfortunate incident that has been taken seriously by the entire industry," Gratton said in an interview. "While a necessary component of mining, tailings facilities create risks that need to be effectively managed."

Companies have pointed to efforts at reducing or managing mine tailings, including drying waste to avoid spills and filling mine pits or tunnels with it.

Earthworks and other groups have protested permitting for mines on both sides of the border, including Toronto-based Seabridge Gold Inc.'s Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell and Imperial Metals' Red Chris copper and gold projects ([Greenwire](#), June 24).

Separately, San Juan Corp. yesterday reported the release of polluted water from its Gold King mine in Colorado. The company pointed to a disturbance from a U.S. EPA investigation related to mine pollution.

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